



# WICHE INSIGHTS

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KNOCKING  
AT THE COLLEGE DOOR

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## An Analysis of Public High School Graduates and COVID-19

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In December 2020, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education released projections for future high school graduating classes in a 10th edition quadrennial report of *Knocking at the College Door*. At the time, it was unknown whether the projections based on pre-pandemic data would match the reality to come.

### Key Takeaways

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had limited effect on the immediate potential number of public high school graduates. But the overall positive leading indicators may mask negative impacts, and some students may be short of needed material or credits to graduate on time. Fast action is needed to avoid graduation dips, and there should be extensive focus on helping recent and forthcoming high school graduates to continue or resume postsecondary pursuits.

The widespread public school enrollment declines in fall 2020 varied by race and ethnicity. If these reductions persist with coming school years, the pre-pandemic predictions of declining numbers of white public high school graduates would amplify and the predicted increase in graduates of color could be dampened.

Younger grades had substantial drops in enrollment last year. If this pattern persists, coupled with the declining birth rate, which steepened in 2020, the number of public high school graduates would be greatly impacted long after the pandemic.

## Summary

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted every aspect of life and led to massive disruptions of U.S. education systems. In December 2020, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) released its projections for future high school graduating classes in its quadrennial report *Knocking at the College Door* ([knocking.wiche.edu](http://knocking.wiche.edu)), as it has done for 40 years, to help policymakers and education leaders in their planning.

However, the data in the 10th edition of *Knocking* predated the pandemic. At the time, it was unknown whether the projections based on that data would match the reality to come. Specifically, would the pandemic, which introduced new barriers for students to reach graduation, lead to smaller-than-expected high school graduating classes? To address this question, WICHE analyzed two pieces of data: public school enrollments through the school year 2020-21 for all states and Class of 2020 public high school graduates from 19 states.<sup>1</sup>

This report provides some of what is seen from data about the last two years and discusses possible impacts with future high school graduate trends.

### Good High School Retention, But Reasons for Concern

Analysis of these [data](#) indicates that public high school graduate numbers may have continued on pace to potentially reach all-time highs in 2020 and 2021.<sup>2</sup> This could reflect expected graduation rate improvements, and in some cases might also represent some of the graduation flexibilities extended students in the 2019-20 school year. Further, public high school populations did not show the [steep enrollment declines seen in public school primary grades](#); the cohorts which

predict increases of graduates through 2025 overwhelmingly remained in the public school pipeline despite COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

But these positive high school enrollment levels likely mask many less immediately obvious impacts of COVID-19. There is an urgent need for states to make every possible effort to [connect to](#) and support the [recent graduates](#) of 2020 and 2021, whose [postsecondary plans](#) may have been disrupted or altered, as seen with the COVID-19 [college enrollment declines](#).<sup>4</sup> Another immediate concern is that many students may be [short of credits](#) needed to graduate this and next school year—on top of the expected [impacts to learning](#).<sup>5</sup> This summer and the coming school year could be pivotal for keeping current high school students on-progress to graduate.

### Urgent Needs for Diverse and Disparately Impacted Students

Students of color are driving the increase in the number of high school graduates, and more recent data confirm this is still the case despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Even while awaiting more precise information for targeted planning, states should continue to adapt and focus on serving the large and increasingly diverse cohorts of young adults, with new needs for academic and other assistance. Ongoing information issued by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center about postsecondary enrollments in the academic year 2020-21, a recent analysis from the [College Board](#), and guidance from the [U.S. Department of Education](#) each provide detail about college enrollment declines, and how much more the COVID-19 pandemic specifically impacted the enrollment of lower-income students and students of color and the institutions they attend.<sup>6</sup>

## COVID-19 Impacts Could Ripple Through Graduate Trends for Years

While public high school populations remained relatively stable through the 2020-21 school year, student populations in elementary and middle school grades notably decreased. Only time will tell if these changes in enrollment levels will become temporary or permanent reductions in the public school sector or may even represent some disengagement from school altogether (since data were not widely available for private or homeschool students, this brief describes public school trends).

A greater accumulation and range of data will be needed to confirm with certainty whether to expect changes in high school graduation rates and the number of future high school graduates in relation to the impacts of interrupted and lost learning. In the final sections, WICHE offers a glimpse of possible long-term consequences for public high school graduates if policymakers and educators are not able to repair the COVID-19 impacts on students in the lower public school grades and discusses numerous real-life impacts that COVID-19 might have seeded in the pipeline of students—that are already evidenced with recent college-going rates.

## Approach

This report describes what can be seen from the available data (see [Data Used for This Analysis](#)) about the Class of 2020 public high school graduates, Class of 2021 public high school populations, and what the past school year's enrollment changes might foretell about future high school graduate populations.

Most of the summary findings presented are about changes in public school student enrollment levels between fall 2019 and fall 2020, and in some cases, how the last school year's changes compare to patterns preceding the pandemic. In places, WICHE also compares the newer data with the projections in *Knocking's* 10th edition, as a proxy for what might have been expected pre-COVID-19. The data and state-level analysis are available as a [downloadable dataset](#) at [knocking.wiche.edu](http://knocking.wiche.edu).

Important considerations about both the robustness and the limitations of what can be concluded from the available data are offered in the [Limitations](#) section. More detailed analysis using the cohort progression methodology that underlies WICHE's high school graduate projections (see [Methodology](#)) was used to supplement and confirm the analysis of annual enrollment changes.

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**This brief describes public school trends. Specific data were not widely available for private or homeschooled students.**

WICHE wishes to acknowledge the valuable feedback Dr. Brian Prescott (National Center for Education Management Systems), Dr. Jenna Sablan (State Higher Education Executive Officers), and Dr. Jeff Strohl (Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce) provided for this report, and the generous support from the College Board for the projections research. All analysis and views are WICHE's alone.

## Key Themes

What is seen from data about the last two school years and possible impacts with future high school graduate trends are discussed in turn below.

### Evidence of Increase in Class of 2020 Public High School Graduates

The first year of projections from WICHE's December 2020 publication of *Knocking at the College Door* was for Class of 2020 graduates.

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Across 19 states with data, the reported public high school Class of 2020 was two percent larger than projected (31,700 more graduates).

At the time, there was concern that the school disruptions in spring 2020 might prevent some students from graduating, and many states responded to try to limit the impact, leading to uncertainty about whether the projections would match reality.

WICHE has collected the reported counts of Class of 2020 public high school graduate for 19 states, which together represented 45 percent of the Class of 2019 public high school graduates (1.6 million graduates). The data preceding the pandemic indicated that these states might see two percent fewer public high school graduates between Class of 2019 and Class of 2020, in total, reflecting the number of public high school students moving through the pipeline, prevailing graduation rates at the time, and a mix of states with declines and increases.

According to the data WICHE collected, these states graduated virtually the same number of

public high school graduates in 2020 as in 2019. Therefore, 2 percent more students graduated than had been projected pre-pandemic (a net 31,700 more graduates). There were more public high school graduates reported in 16 of these 19 states than had been projected (see Figure 1 on page 6).

It is not possible to know what exactly drove this somewhat more positive graduation picture than had been predicted for these states. While some amount of the increase may have been a product of continued graduation rate increases (see [Appendix 2](#)), a portion may have related to states' flexibilities for graduating seniors in Spring 2020 or other unforeseeable causes.<sup>7</sup> Particularly, some of these states had remarkably different numbers of graduates than had been projected pre-pandemic.

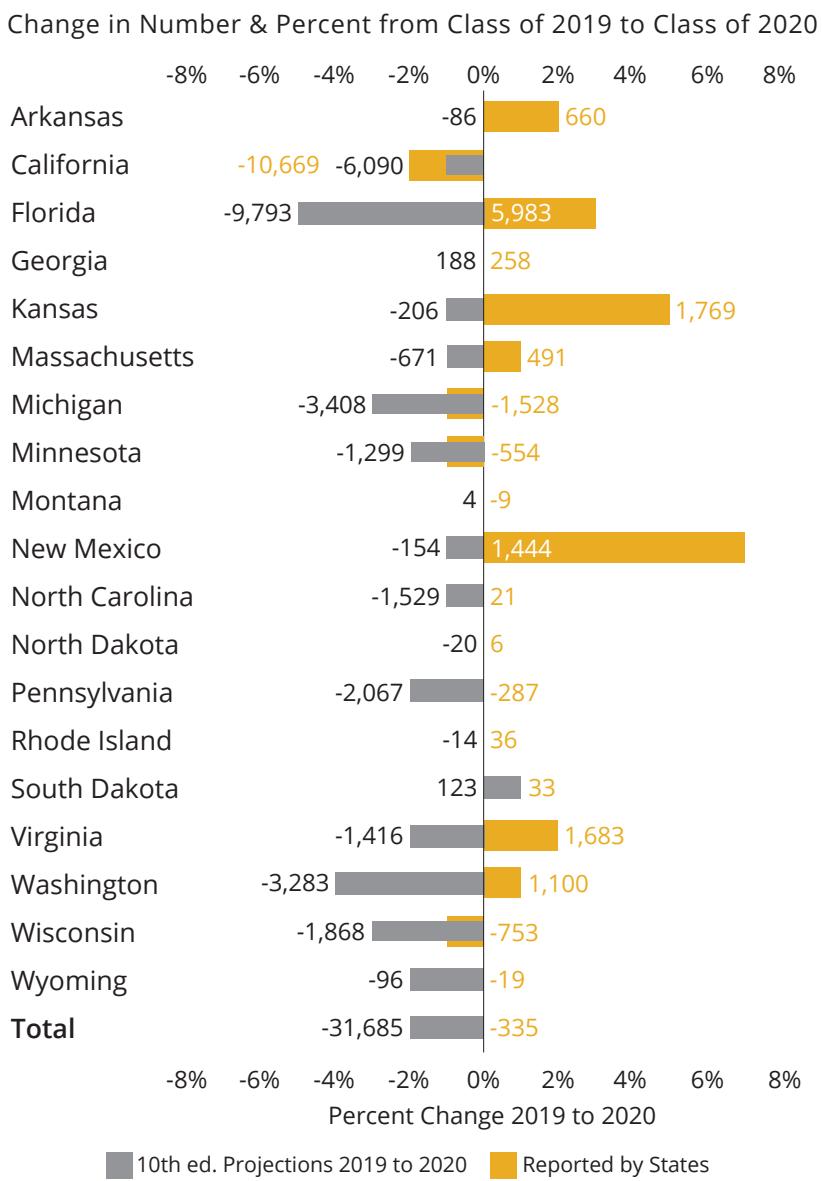
Florida, for example, reported almost 9 percent more public high school graduates than had been projected (15,800 graduates), and accounts for about half of the net difference across these 19 states. Additionally, Florida was projected to see 5 percent fewer public high school graduates for Class of 2020 based on a relatively smaller number

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Positive developments even for states that might have expected fewer graduates due to youth demographics.

of public school 11th graders proceeding to 12th grade between 2019 and 2020. Instead, there were 3 percent more [graduates in Class of 2020](#) than Class of 2019 (6,000 more).<sup>8</sup> Similarly unpredicted rates of increase occurred in [Washington](#), [New Mexico](#), Kansas, and to some extent, [Virginia](#).<sup>9</sup>

## Figure 1. Twelve of 19 States Had More Public High School Graduates in 2020 than in 2019; Almost All Had More than Projected



Source: WICHE analysis. See also Appendix 1 and the [downloadable data](#) for more detail.

Even states that might have expected fewer graduates due to demographics had positive developments with Class of 2020. In [Michigan](#), [Minnesota](#), and [Wisconsin](#), a slightly higher than projected number of graduates minimized the reduction in graduates between 2019 and 2020, to 1 percent fewer in each state, and helped keep

Massachusetts in positive territory (1 percent more than 2019).<sup>10</sup>

The most notable exception to the overall trend of increase with these states was California, which had been projected to have 1.4 percent fewer public high school graduates in Class of 2020 than Class of 2019 (6,100 fewer) and reported 2.4 percent fewer (10,700 fewer). However,

### [California's on-time graduation rate](#)

"remained largely steady overall in the 2019-20 school year—and some of the state's highest-need students saw increases," according to the California Department of Education.<sup>11</sup> (The greatest numeric decreases were with white and Asian graduates, at slightly higher rates than had been projected.)

Graduates of color generally appeared to post substantial increases and contribute strongly to the overall increases for the 14 of 19 states where race and ethnicity data were obtained for Class of 2020 graduates (despite some state-level exceptions).<sup>12</sup> Some decline had been projected for the number of Black public high school graduates, but 4 percent more graduates than projected were reported by these states. Roughly the same number of Black public graduates were reported in 2020 as 2019, although there were still slight declines in a few states such as Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia. In Florida, the greatest increases were with Black public high school graduates, an almost 7 percent increase between 2019 and 2020, and almost 15 percent more than had been projected. There were 2 percent more Hispanic graduates reported in Class of 2020 than had been projected across these states, and 11 of

14 states reported increased numbers of Hispanic graduates.

About one percent fewer Asian public high school graduates were reported to have graduated in 2020 than in 2019, roughly corresponding with what had been projected across these states. White public high school graduates had been projected to decline in number across these states (3 percent projected decline), and 2 percent fewer white graduates were reported in 2020 than in 2019. Ten of these states, however, showed lesser declines than predicted. The results are somewhat less clear for the student populations with relatively lower numbers and that can overlap in terms of racial identity—American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and multiracial. Of note, a 2 percent decrease had been projected for American Indian/Alaska Native public school graduates and instead about 1 percent more graduated in 2020 than 2019, across these states.

## Record High Number of Public School 12th Graders in Fall 2020—Still Unknown How Many Might Not Have Graduated

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. public high school graduates had been projected to vary only about 1 percent in number between 2019 and 2021. With the pandemic, concerns arose that there could be drops in the number of high school graduates as students dropped out or disengaged when schools shifted to remote learning and other online modalities.

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### Substantial increases of graduates of color contributed strongly to the overall increases with Class of 2020.

Since Class of 2021 graduate data are not yet widely available, WICHE examined 12th grade enrollments from the 2020-21 school year for whether major rates of dropout were evident

in these leading indicator data. This included comparing the reported fall 2020 enrollments with WICHE's projections for public school 12th grade enrollments that were issued in December 2020, and comparing last year's reported public school enrollment patterns to recent past enrollment patterns.

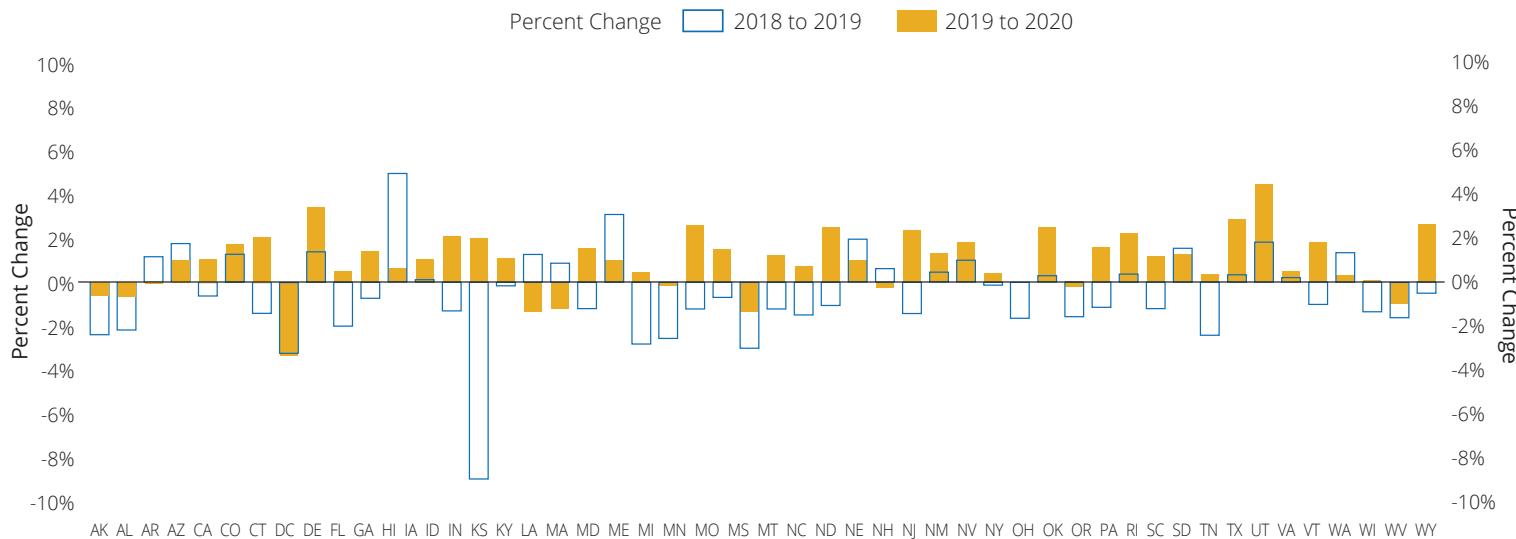
Keeping the necessary [caveats](#) in mind, these leading indicator data do not suggest an obvious major impact in the overall potential number of high school graduates. Rather than seeing fewer high school seniors enrolled in fall 2020, as was feared due to COVID-19, 39 states had an annual increase in the number of enrolled 12th graders in fall 2020. There were 3.5 million 12th graders enrolled in public schools in fall 2020. This was ultimately 1 percent more public high school seniors than had been projected for 2020. That is, there was no apparent major drop-off in the numbers of 12th graders who enrolled in public schools in fall 2020—it appears the vast majority of 11th graders from fall 2019 continued to fall 2020

as 12th graders, despite the impacts of COVID (see Figure 2 on page 8).

And perhaps more relevant, the vast majority of states showed greater than previous rates of increase—12th grade enrollment levels did not

appear to diminish in fall 2020. This was true even for many of the states that had been experiencing tightening or declining numbers of public school

## Figure 2. Public School 12th Grade Enrollments Were Higher in Fall 2020 than Fall 2019 in 39 States



Source: WICHE analysis. Notes: Data not available for Illinois. Indiana Department of Education confirmed that there was a 9 percent decrease in reported public school 12th graders between 2018 and 2019 in relation to the closure of some charter schools, including two that enrolled a sizable number of students. See also Appendix 4 and the [downloadable data](#) for more detail.

12th graders in recent years. States that did see lower than recent levels of public school 12th graders include: Arkansas, Arizona, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Washington.

Potentially, the slight increases in the number of public high school 12th graders compared to what had previously been projected may exemplify a continuation of the trend of rising high school completion—in which one could expect greater numbers of 10th, 11th and 12th graders as fewer high schoolers drop out before graduating. And, this appears to be part of the explanation, based on detailed analysis using the methodology underlying WICHE's projections. This methodology estimates student progression from fall-to-fall between grades and over long time periods such as between ninth and 12th grade (see also [Appendix 2](#)). Of course, the

big caveat is that the fall enrollments do not reflect whether or how many 12th graders were impacted in their progress from enrollment to graduation between October 2020 and May 2021.

While major decreases in the number of public high school 12th graders are not evident, even relatively marginal impacts will be unwelcome news, if they materialize. By one estimate, at least 3 million children were [unaccounted for](#) fully by schools in fall 2020 (which could be approximately 6.5 percent of public school students between

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grades 1 to 12).<sup>13</sup> There are real concerns about the pandemic's possible impact on high school graduation, amid reports about students' flagging attendance, [failing grades](#), and circumstances outside of school that might lead high schoolers to not have the credits needed to graduate or to [drop out](#) between fall 2020 and spring 2021, among other things.<sup>14</sup>

**But the available data do not reflect whether fall 2020 12th graders were impacted getting to graduation between fall 2020 and spring 2021.**

Given the disparate impacts of the pandemic, WICHE analyzed the public school fall 12th grade enrollments for any evidence of how the pandemic may have impacted racial and ethnic groups differently. As discussed under [Limitations](#), fall enrollments can only provide an indication of overall student number impacts and do not indicate the reasons for numeric change. Moreover, it would be important to interpret differences in the context of individual state settings and student populations, differences in the learning environments students experienced this past school year, and other factors that inevitably require more detailed data than presented here.

Across the majority of states it appears there was relatively high retention of public school 12th graders of all races and ethnicities through fall 2020, at least when compared to the prior year and to what might have been predicted pre-pandemic (Figure 3). There was, however, slightly lower annual increase of Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander public school 12th graders than might have been expected compared to pre-pandemic data.

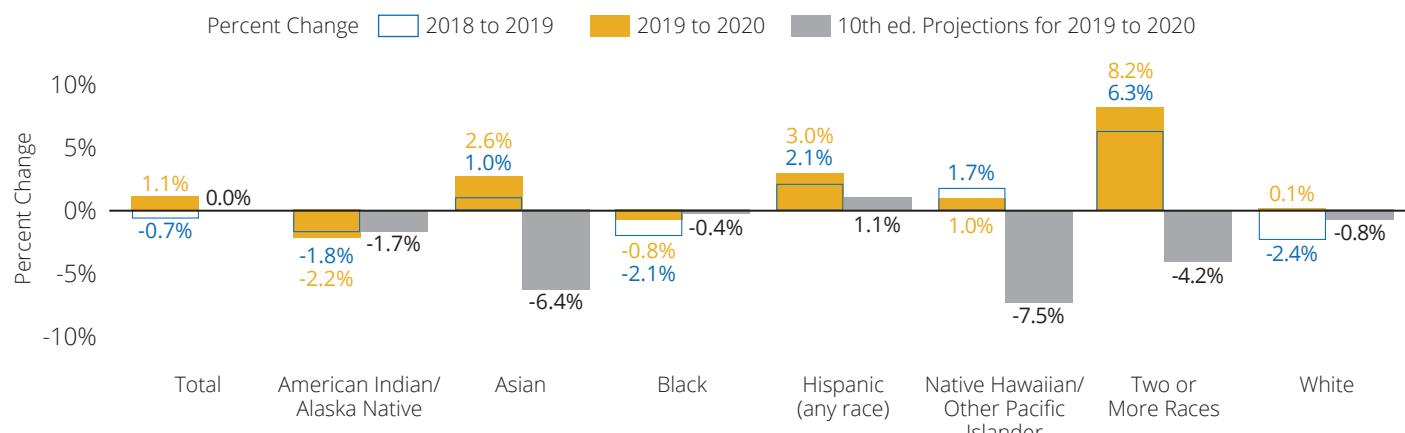
The positive fall 2020 enrollment levels do not reveal the many ways in which students were disproportionately and inequitably impacted during the pandemic, particularly considering the variable learning options available to public high school students during the course of the

pandemic. Given the importance of understanding any disparate impacts of the pandemic, WICHE will continue to gather and analyze new data as they become available.

## How Enrollment Changes in the 2020-21 School Year Could Impact Future High Graduate Trends

The big question, then, is what this all means for future waves of graduates. While the number of students enrolled with states' public high schools in the fall of 2020 did not appear to decrease at alarming rates, some grade-level enrollments saw substantial decreases between fall 2019 and 2020. It remains to be seen whether these enrollment impacts to public schools are indicative of new trends or will be "blips" in the data that revert to previous trendlines as the pandemic wanes. There is no [comparable](#) year-long international event (at

**Figure 3. Annual Fall Enrollment Changes for Public School 12th Grade by Race and Ethnicity**



Source: WICHE analysis.

least in modern times) that substantially impacted the ability of [schools to stay open](#)—in addition to the possible impacts of the [economic recession](#)—for informing projections.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent analysis of forthcoming data, along with information about students attending private schools or being homeschooled and other more detailed data, will provide more clarity about the impacts of COVID-19 on early grade enrollment.

Still, WICHE's analysis of these most current data can illustrate the potential impact on future public high school graduating classes, should the numeric impact on public school enrollments stay similar as the cohorts progress through the education pipeline. Essentially, the decreased first grade enrollments would show up as big drops in the number of graduates eleven years from now, as those students progress through the pipeline.

Figure 4 on page 11 shows the data modeled using WICHE's projections methodology (see Methodology). Specifically, modelling of this scenario incorporates the roughly 3 percent loss of students from public school grades 1 to 7 in the 2020-21 school year. It is also crucial to understand whether the data show disparate impacts by race and ethnicity to develop recovery strategies. Separate scenarios project the potential impacts of the last year's public school enrollment changes on public high school graduates as they vary by student race and ethnicity.

#### **Public High School Classes of 2021 to 2024.**

These data suggest that there could be roughly the same number to slightly more (1 percent) public high school graduates over the next three to four years (Class of 2021 to 2024), compared to

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Potentially about the same number of graduates for the next 3 to 4 years.

what was projected pre-pandemic. This is largely a reflection of the overall positive enrollment levels in the 2020-21 school year for public school students in tenth to 12th grade, which so far appear consistent with the small increases that had been projected and that are the basis for projections of increasing numbers of graduates through 2024.

#### **Public High School Classes of 2025 to 2027.**

There were notable decreases in public middle school and ninth grade enrollments last year. If last year's enrollment changes persist, this would predict a dip in the number of graduates from

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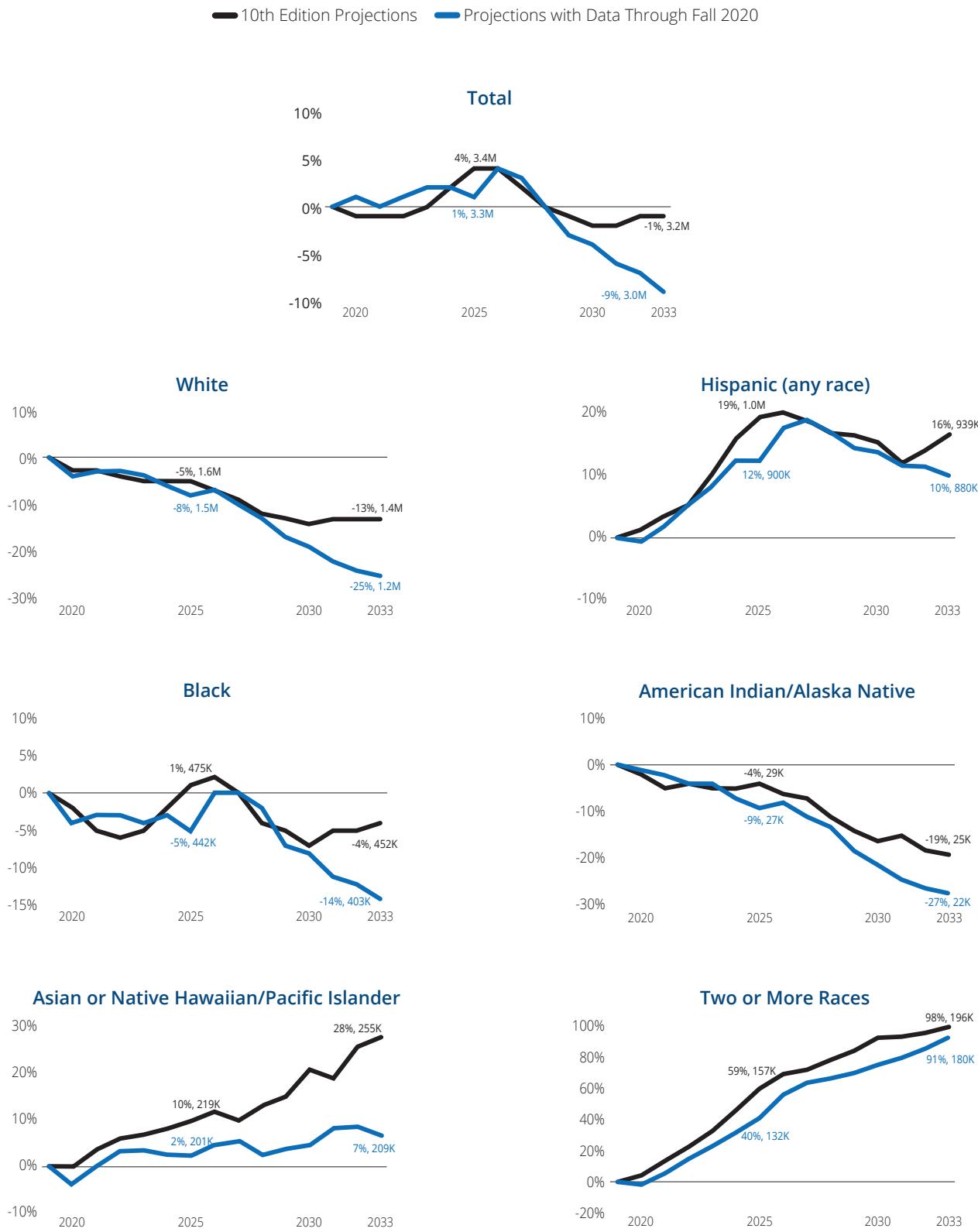
**Between 1 to 3 percent fewer public high school graduates might be projected for Class of 2025 to 2027.**

public schools, between 1 to 3 percent fewer public school graduates for Class of 2025 to 2027 than had been predicted pre-pandemic. Already two percent fewer public school sixth graders had been predicted for fall 2020 with pre-pandemic data, as the smaller cohorts of youth that result from birth declines move into middle schools. Overall, about 4 percent fewer public school sixth graders were reported in fall 2020 than fall 2019, so about twice the amount of reduction that had been projected.

The magnitude of change in last year's public middle school and ninth grade enrollments varied by race and ethnicity, especially when compared to what was projected pre-pandemic. Five percent more Hispanic public school ninth graders had been projected for fall 2020 than in fall 2019, whereas 0.4 percent fewer were reported in the fall 2020 enrollments, suggesting that up to 5

**Figure 4. Illustration of How COVID-19 Might Impact Public High School Graduate Numbers if Enrollment Impacts Hold**

Projected Percent Change in Public High School Graduates from Class of 2019



Source: WICHE analysis incorporating data through fall 2020. Note: WICHE's December 2020 10th edition of *Knocking at the College Door* projections included only limited projections for the separate Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander categories, so they are shown combined here.

percent fewer Hispanic ninth graders actually enrolled in public schools than might have been expected. Similarly for Black ninth graders, the reported loss of 1 percent might be more like 4 percent when compared to increase that was predicted pre-pandemic.

There were similar possible reductions of 4 to 5 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and multiracial public school ninth graders, and reductions of about 2 percent for white and Asian public school ninth graders, when the fall 2020 changes are compared to what had been predicted pre-pandemic.

The previously projected rates of decrease for Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native public school sixth graders in fall 2020 were amplified in fall 2020. There were 3 percent fewer Hispanic and 4 percent fewer American Indian/Alaska Native public school sixth graders in fall 2020 compared to the 1 percent fewer that had been projected for each population of students.

### **Public High School Classes of 2027 to 2033.**

The public elementary school declines from the 2020-21 school year would predict even steeper decline than had already been projected, between 3 to 9 percent greater than had been projected pre-pandemic. For example, the projected rate of decrease for public school first graders tripled in fall 2020, 3 percent fewer compared to the 1 percent fewer projected by pre-pandemic data.

The greatest rates of decrease in the public elementary school grades, overall, were among white and American Indian/Alaska Native students – there 5 percent fewer grade 1 to 5 students

for both groups between fall 2019 and fall 2020. Decreases of 1 percent and 3 percent, respectively, had been projected pre-pandemic, so the reported decreases for white public school grade 1 to 5 students might be four times what could have been expected. There has been some [thinking but little conclusive data](#) yet about whether white families were more likely than other families to have moved their students to private schools; meanwhile, some [data](#) do indicate that white students still enrolled in public schools were more likely to have had access to in-person instruction this past year.<sup>16</sup>

There were somewhat lesser rates of enrollment decline with Hispanic and Black students in grade 1 to 5 (2 and 3 percent fewer, respectively), although the rates of decrease could possibly be two to three times what might have been expected pre-pandemic, which was 1 percent for each of these student populations.

The fall 2020 enrollment changes among Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander public school students, across the grade levels, predicts a potential re-calibration of Asian and Native

Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander public high school graduates as depicted in the Figure 4. Rates of enrollment change for Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander public school students appeared to be generally at or below the average rate, overall. But

when compared to the growth of these student populations that was predicted pre-pandemic, the actual rates of decrease between fall 2019 and fall 2020 are likely much greater. And, there were greater than average rates of decrease in states with more substantial numbers of these students.

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**After 2027, there could be greater decline in public high school graduates than had already been projected.**

**High School Graduates Past 2033.** Finally, beyond 2033, swift declines had already been projected for U.S. high school graduates, relating to the reduction in births that began in 2008 and has brought fewer annual births virtually every year

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Projected declines past 2033  
are likely to be amplified  
from COVID-19 induced birth  
declines.

since. And it appears that these long-term declines will deepen. It was recently announced that [births declined at an even greater pace in 2020](#), down 4 percent nationally in 2020 compared to 2019 (ranging from 1 percent to 7 percent decrease by state).<sup>17</sup> Birth counts from the year 2021 are likely to reflect impacts of COVID-19, and WICHE will continue to monitor the data; meanwhile, some [researchers project steep declines](#).<sup>18</sup>

*Note:* The steep changes observed in fall 2020 with preschool and kindergarten were not a key focus of this brief, because they are not included in the making of the projections, but some of the [steepest enrollment declines](#) between fall 2019 and 2020 were with these early childhood levels. Delayed entry to school may therefore further impact the education pipeline over the longer term.<sup>19</sup>

**Possible Stakes for the Future.** To be clear, the last year's enrollment reductions do not necessarily mean there will be fewer high school graduates. The projections shown and discussed in this section only provide a glimpse of the possible impacts on the number of high school graduates resulting from the public school grade 1 to 12 enrollment declines this past year. These students

could have shifted to homeschooling or private schools. The predicted trendline of total U.S. high school graduates might not be altered, if the students who did not show up in public schools in fall 2020 become as or more likely to ultimately graduate in the other environments that their families opted for.

But, there clearly could be implications for public schools if the fall 2020 enrollment shifts persist. And there could be greater uncertainty about future graduate trends if students continue in other learning environments that are not as traceable (private school, homeschooled, or unaccounted).

Of course, the immediate concern is what these fall enrollment data do not depict, which are the impacts that continued to occur through the end of the 2020-21 school year. The differences by race and ethnicity observed from the fall 2020 public school enrollment changes may be the first sign of possible further disparate impacts. Importantly, these data do not reveal anything about the [variation in learning modes](#) (in-person, hybrid, and remote) that were available to students during this past year, and has been shown to have varied by student race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status and may have bearing on learning progress this past school year.<sup>20</sup>

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Differences by race and ethnicity in the fall 2020 public school enrollment changes may be the first sign of possible further disparate impacts into the future.

The modeled scenarios help illustrate some of the variation below the topline, and possible stakes for the future. The possible [impacts for high school-age students](#) are unique, with less time to recoup lost opportunities and credits needed before graduation in the next one to three years.<sup>21</sup> The potential dips between 2025 and 2027 driven by the decreases in public school middle to ninth graders certainly encompass students who could instead graduate from homeschooling or private schools. But the changes could also signal reasons to be concerned for the cohorts who entered middle and high school during this disrupted year. In terms of high school graduate trends, these are pivotal years for the nation and most states, with peak numbers of graduates predicted around 2025 before longer term pre-pandemic declines begin.

## Discussion and Implications

Before considering what might come next, it is worth remembering the state of education even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, [high school graduation rates](#) had been improving for many consecutive years, reaching all-time highs by the 2018-19 school year, and [college attainment rates](#) were steadily increasing.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, and despite considerable progress, achievement gaps persisted for students of color, there was overall stagnation in academic measures, and – while the number of children living in poverty had declined – almost half of public school students were [lower-income](#) and stark differences continued to exist by [race and ethnicity](#).<sup>23</sup> The overwhelming evidence is that these 12-15 months will have, on average, [amplified existing inequities](#).<sup>24</sup>

The most pronounced enrollment changes between fall 2019 and 2020 at U.S. public schools were seen with younger student populations. The vast majority of the observed higher-than-average enrollment change over the last year is presumably from families who left public schools in fall 2020 to homeschool or find alternative arrangements for their schooling or childcare needs, including private schools.<sup>25</sup> Data from sources such as the [U.S. Census](#) Pulse survey about rapid increases in homeschooling over the last year indicate that these types of potentially temporary “unenrollment” from public schools is likely a key portion of the significant elementary school decreases.<sup>26</sup>

Although this brief identifies some leading indicators of our education pipeline and shows a mixed bag of possible COVID-19 impacts (with a host of caveats attached), it is clear that substantial work remains to be done to assess and address issues such as learning loss, mental health, and educational inequities amplified by the pandemic. These initial numbers may provide some limited

reassurance to policymakers and education leaders that the number of high school graduates does not appear to be immediately impacted by COVID-19. But other data and research strongly show that the pandemic is associated with big and inequitable drops in postsecondary enrollment.<sup>27</sup>

When combined, these two pieces of information suggest that the COVID-19-induced decline in postsecondary enrollment among recent high school graduates is largely attributable to decreases in college-going rates rather than a smaller supply of high school graduates. Although the data and information available to policymakers remain incomplete and ever-evolving, the size of college enrollment declines and evidence that the declines are disproportionately concentrated among low-income students and students of color at two-year institutions require major and immediate intervention by policymakers.

The recently passed American Rescue Plan Act, along with the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, provide education systems – both K-12 and postsecondary – substantial resources to address these impacts. Given that the impact of the pandemic bridges K-12 and postsecondary education, it seems fully appropriate that there be a renewed commitment to building meaningful pathways from high school graduation to postsecondary education. The resources provided to state, district, and school leadership offers an opportunity to blunt impacts of the pandemic that could reverberate through society and for generations of students to come.

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This publication was finalized June 30, 2021. The [downloadable dataset](#) will be updated as newer data become available.

## Data Used for This Analysis

Two pieces of data were obtained from different sources and analyzed for this report: public school enrollments through fall 2020, and public high school graduates through Class of 2020.<sup>28</sup>

**Public school fall enrollments.** The bulk of the newer data analyzed in this report are state-level public school fall enrollments (October headcounts) for the past two school years (2019-20 and 2020-21), published in the U.S. Department of Education [Common Core of Data](#) (CCD).<sup>29</sup> In considering the implications of disrupted learning this last year, differences across settings below the state-level will be very important. For example, whether there are differences with more urban or rural settings and more or less racially and socioeconomically concentrated school settings. While some of this detail is present in the CCD school district-level data files, which were released with the state-level CCD data, even more detailed grade-by-grade data are typically available from the CCD school-level files, which were not released by the time of publication.

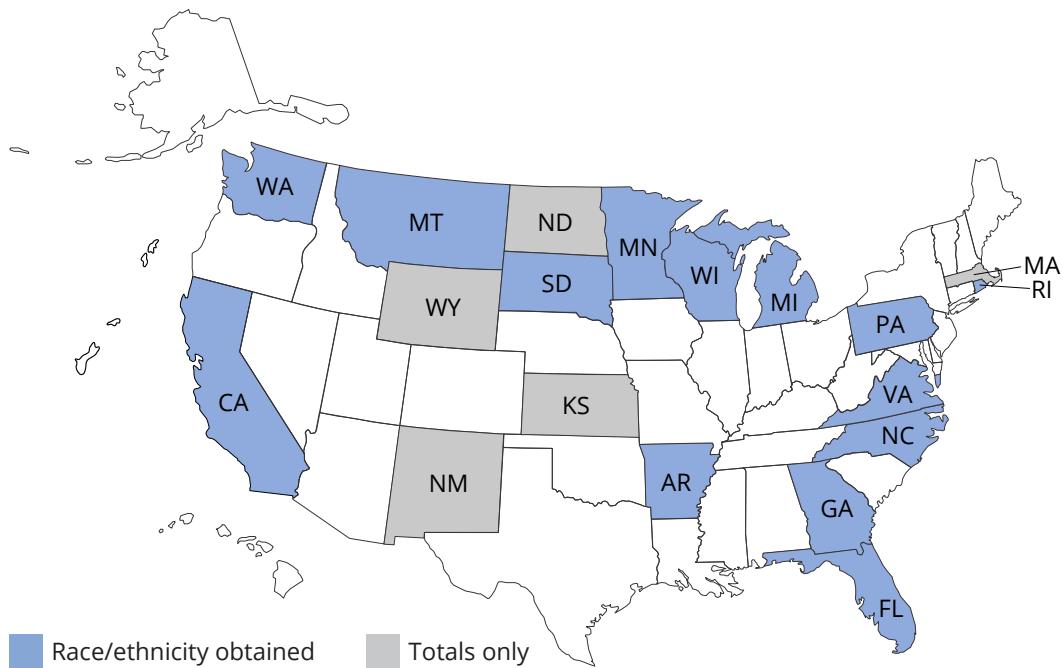
Therefore, this brief only reports state-level public school trends. Results for the nation represent 49 states and the District of Columbia—not including Illinois, which had not reported data to the CCD by the time of publication. Data and results for U.S. territories and outlying areas, where they are available, are included in the [downloadable data](#), as are results by major geographical region.

**Public high school graduates.** WICHE obtained data for public high school graduates through Class of 2020 for 19 states (Figure 5), from state departments of education online data sources.<sup>30</sup>

Findings by race and ethnicity will reflect the categories for federal education data reporting.<sup>31</sup> Grade-by-grade detail for special interest populations such as those students who were economically disadvantaged, experiencing homeless, or migrant was available for 20 states from state department of education sources, but the level of detail was highly variable, and no critical mass was available for analysis.

WICHE found detailed state data about private school populations for only seven of the states,

**Figure 5. States that WICHE Obtained Public High School Class of 2020 Graduate Data**



Source: Data sources for each state are documented in the [downloadable data](#).

and detailed homeschooling data for only one state. [Federal data for private schools](#) end with the 2017-18 school year, and 2016 for [homeschooled](#) populations.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the analysis in this brief only describes public school populations.

## Limitations

WICHE reports findings that appear consistent across the data analyzed; nonetheless, there are important considerations and qualifications related to these leading indicator data.

**The data describe enrollment levels as of fall 2020, but not retention or progress through spring 2021.** Perhaps the most straightforward caveat is that the data and findings only describe enrollment levels as of fall 2020. These data do not reflect for any grade level of student: individual student academic progress, the effects of interruption or other socioemotional types of impacts from the pandemic that factor into school progress, retention/attrition, or reasons for the observed changes or patterns. For example, the fall enrollments provide a sense of the overall potential number of public high school graduates, but do not indicate how many 12th graders were impacted in their progress to graduation between October 2020 and May 2021.

**The data are for public schools only.** This is most relevant for interpreting the starker enrollment changes in primary grades where, for example, homeschooling or transferring to private schools may be a likely explanation for changed enrollment levels. Observed change in the high school enrollment numbers is more marginal, but it is still not possible to discern “transfer out” from possible complete disengagement or dropout.

**WICHE used several methods to confirm the trends presented but fall enrollments do not reveal the full impact of the pandemic on students.** There are limits to what can be understood from annual enrollment data, and

some amount of difference might simply be “noise.” In fact, many states might have expected increases or decreases in the number of public school students regardless of COVID-19, due to their changing populations, migration, and typical school choice patterns, among other things. WICHE analyzed for changes in progression ratios and with the last school year compared to prior years. But fluctuation in the number of students can reflect many things. For example, if some students in a given state transferred from public to private school as they entered 11th grade, but a similar rate of transfer out did not occur for the 12th graders, the 11th-to-12th grade ratio might appear to increase, but such an increase may not necessarily reflect increases in progression or public high school retention. Similarly, fluctuation may represent changes in the rate of grade repeating or dropout from the grade, among other things.

## Methodology

WICHE’s projections use a cohort progression method that computes the ratio of students enrolled in each grade who appear in the number of students enrolled in the next higher grade in the next year. The detailed grade-by-grade progression ratios in each of the most recent five years are used to estimate what number of currently enrolled students will progress to each successive grade, and eventually graduate, in future years. (WICHE also extends the progressions using recent births data.) The source data and the resulting projections implicitly reflect the many things that drive school progression, including the impacts of policy and practice changes, family/student migration (domestic and in-migration), transfers between public schools and private or other schooling environments, changes over time in progression promotion or hold back, and youth mortality. Full details are in the [Technical Appendix](#) of the December 2020 report at [knocking.wiche.edu](http://knocking.wiche.edu).

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Public High School Class of 2020: Projected vs. Reported Graduates

	Number of Graduates		Difference		Change from Class of 2019		
	Projected	Reported	Number	Percent	Projected	Reported	
Arkansas	32,275	33,021	746	2%	-86	0%	660 2%
California	432,560	427,981	-4,579	-1%	-6,090	-1%	-10,669 -2%
Florida	180,533	196,309	15,776	9%	-9,793	-5%	5,983 3%
Georgia	113,156	113,226	70	0%	188	0%	258 0%
Kansas	33,118	35,093	1,975	6%	-206	-1%	1,769 5%
Massachusetts	67,243	68,405	1,162	2%	-671	-1%	491 1%
Michigan	100,280	102,160	1,880	2%	-3,408	-3%	-1,528 -1%
Minnesota	59,861	60,606	745	1%	-1,299	-2%	-554 -1%
Montana	9,256	9,243	-13	0%	4	0%	-9 0%
New Mexico	19,621	21,219	1,598	8%	-154	-1%	1,444 7%
North Carolina	106,839	108,389	1,550	1%	-1,529	-1%	21 0%
North Dakota	6,830	6,856	26	0%	-20	0%	6 0%
Pennsylvania	123,448	125,228	1,780	1%	-2,067	-2%	-287 0%
Rhode Island	9,784	9,834	50	1%	-14	0%	36 0%
South Dakota	8,354	8,264	-90	-1%	123	1%	33 0%
Virginia	86,884	89,983	3,099	4%	-1,416	-2%	1,683 2%
Washington	69,838	74,591	4,753	7%	-3,283	-4%	1,100 1%
Wisconsin	59,635	60,750	1,115	2%	-1,868	-3%	-753 -1%
Wyoming	5,596	5,673	77	1%	-96	-2%	-19 0%
<b>Total of States with Data</b>	<b>1,525,111</b>	<b>1,556,831</b>	<b>31,720</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>-31,685</b>	<b>-2%</b>	<b>-335 0%</b>

 % difference/decrease below zero       % difference/increase above zero

Source: WICHE analysis from data through school year 2020-21 for 19 states (see [Data Used for This Analysis](#)). See the downloadable data for more detail.

## Appendix 2: Is There Any Sign About the Prospects for On-Time High School Graduation Rates?

WICHE also looked at the numbers of 12th graders in fall 2020 compared to the number of ninth graders three years ago, in fall 2017 and then compared this to the ratio for the two most recent ninth-to-12th grade spans prior to the 2020-21 school year. To be clear, while this ratio is mathematically similar to a graduation rate indicator, it is not a cohort-adjusted indicator.

However, the overall ratio of 12th graders in fall 2020 compared to the number of ninth graders in fall 2017 was about one percentage point higher than the average of the previous two such ninth-to-12th grade ratios (i.e., it increased by one percentage point over these three years).<sup>33</sup> This ratio was higher in 38 of the 49 states and District of Columbia, on average by 1.2 percentage points.

**Ratio of 12th Graders to the Number of Ninth Graders  
Three Years Prior**

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Total	91%	91%	92%
White	92%	92%	93%
Black	81%	82%	83%
Hispanic (any race)	91%	91%	92%
Asian	105%	104%	103%
Two or More Races	96%	97%	96%
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	89%	88%	87%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	85%	84%	84%

Source: WICHE analysis.

Increases in the ninth-to-12th grade ratios are also promising for some student populations of color, being at least as much as the observed overall increase. On the other hand, this ratio decreased over these three years for Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native students. This could be a concerning difference from what is observed overall.

The official cohort adjusted graduation rate would presumably be able to differentiate those

students who had affirmatively transferred out of their public schools (e.g., to homeschool or private schools) from those who stopped out or were unaccounted for, which is not possible from these fall headcount data. Still, this ratio ostensibly seems to be another indicator of the overall positive public high school enrollment trends even during the two school years impacted by COVID-19. Of course, these high-level indicators should be interpreted with caution, whether they indicate positive or negative change.

### Appendix 3. Public School Enrollment change, Fall 2018 to Fall 2020, by Grade and Student Race and Ethnicity

	Pre-K	Kinder-garten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	
<b>Total, Public Schools</b>															
2018 to 2019	-2%	1%	0%	0%	-1%	-2%	-2%	0%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	-1%	
2019 to 2020	-23%	-9%	-3%	-3%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-4%	-1%	1%	-1%	1%	1%	1%	
<b>Student Race and Ethnicity, Public Schools</b>															
Total	2018 to 2019	3%	1%	-1%	-1%	-2%	-3%	-3%	-2%	0%	0%	-2%	-1%	0%	-2%
	2019 to 2020	-20%	-11%	-5%	-5%	-5%	-5%	-5%	-5%	-3%	-1%	-2%	-2%	-1%	0%
White	2018 to 2019	3%	0%	-1%	-2%	-2%	-4%	-2%	0%	2%	3%	1%	-1%	-2%	-2%
	2019 to 2020	-25%	-10%	-3%	-2%	-4%	-1%	-5%	-3%	0%	2%	-1%	2%	1%	-1%
Black	2018 to 2019	5%	1%	1%	0%	1%	-1%	-1%	2%	4%	5%	6%	3%	2%	2%
	2019 to 2020	-22%	-7%	-3%	-2%	-3%	-1%	-3%	-3%	0%	2%	0%	4%	3%	3%
Hispanic	2018 to 2019	5%	-1%	1%	4%	1%	2%	-2%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	3%	1%
	2019 to 2020	-19%	-4%	-3%	-1%	3%	0%	1%	-3%	1%	1%	-1%	-2%	0%	3%
Two or More Races	2018 to 2019	11%	8%	6%	6%	5%	5%	4%	7%	10%	12%	8%	8%	9%	6%
	2019 to 2020	-21%	-7%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	4%	8%	7%	7%	8%	8%
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	2018 to 2019	17%	0%	-1%	-1%	1%	5%	-7%	-2%	-1%	-4%	3%	4%	0%	2%
	2019 to 2020	-29%	-15%	-2%	-2%	-2%	0%	4%	-8%	-2%	0%	-7%	2%	3%	1%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	2018 to 2019	1%	-1%	-2%	-2%	-4%	-5%	-2%	-2%	0%	0%	-3%	0%	-3%	-2%
	2019 to 2020	-24%	-11%	-3%	-5%	-5%	-6%	-6%	-4%	-4%	-1%	-2%	-3%	0%	-2%

Change from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020

 Decrease  Increase

Source: WICHE analysis.

## Appendix 4. Public School Enrollment Change, Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, Total of Races & Ethnicities

	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Nation	-3%	-3%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-4%	-1%	1%	-1%	1%	1%	1%
Alabama	-2%	-2%	-2%	-3%	-5%	-3%	1%	3%	0%	2%	1%	-1%
Alaska	-1%	-2%	-2%	-2%	-3%	-1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	-1%
Arizona	-2%	-3%	-3%	-3%	-6%	-5%	-2%	1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%
Arkansas	-3%	-2%	-2%	-3%	-5%	-3%	-1%	7%	-1%	1%	1%	0%
California	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	0%	-5%	-2%	-4%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Colorado	-3%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-6%	-4%	-1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%
Connecticut	-1%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-4%	-3%	-3%	1%	-2%	0%	-1%	2%
Delaware	-3%	-5%	-2%	-2%	-3%	-2%	1%	0%	-2%	2%	2%	3%
District of Columbia	-1%	-1%	3%	0%	1%	0%	1%	10%	0%	11%	1%	-3%
Florida	-3%	-3%	-7%	2%	-4%	-4%	1%	-1%	2%	0%	1%	0%
Georgia	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-5%	-3%	-1%	2%	-1%	3%	3%	1%
Hawaii	-6%	-2%	-4%	-4%	23%	-24%	-1%	1%	-1%	3%	2%	1%
Idaho	-3%	-1%	-3%	-2%	-3%	-4%	0%	2%	0%	3%	1%	2%
Illinois	Data not available											
Indiana	1%	-4%	-1%	-3%	-3%	-3%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%
Iowa	-2%	-1%	-2%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-1%	1%	1%	2%	-1%	1%
Kansas	-4%	-5%	-3%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-1%	1%	0%	-1%	0%	1%
Kentucky	-5%	5%	-11%	-5%	-7%	-4%	-3%	1%	-1%	1%	0%	-1%
Louisiana	-2%	-2%	-3%	-4%	-6%	-3%	-2%	3%	-3%	2%	3%	-1%
Maine	-5%	-4%	-7%	-5%	-7%	-4%	-4%	-1%	-2%	0%	1%	0%
Maryland	-4%	-4%	-4%	-2%	-4%	-3%	0%	2%	-2%	3%	1%	1%
Massachusetts	-6%	-3%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-2%	1%	-3%	-1%	0%	2%
Michigan	-4%	-3%	-4%	-2%	-4%	-4%	-5%	-1%	-2%	-3%	1%	0%
Minnesota	-2%	-3%	-2%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-2%	1%	0%	-1%	2%	3%
Mississippi	-8%	-6%	-10%	2%	-14%	-7%	-4%	5%	-3%	-2%	2%	-1%
Missouri	-4%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-5%	-4%	-2%	2%	0%	1%	1%	2%
Montana	-4%	-5%	-6%	-3%	-7%	-5%	1%	-1%	4%	0%	3%	1%
Nebraska	-1%	-2%	-1%	-4%	-4%	-1%	6%	-5%	-1%	-1%	1%	1%
Nevada	-5%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-6%	-3%	2%	2%	2%	0%	2%
New Hampshire	-7%	-4%	-6%	-2%	-7%	-5%	-3%	-1%	-2%	-1%	0%	0%
New Jersey	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-4%	-2%	-2%	1%	-2%	-1%	1%	2%
New Mexico	-7%	-6%	-7%	-6%	-9%	-5%	-2%	1%	-2%	2%	2%	1%
New York	-3%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-4%	-3%	-2%	0%	-3%	0%	0%	0%
North Carolina	-3%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-6%	-4%	-2%	1%	-1%	6%	-6%	1%
North Dakota	-1%	-4%	1%	-2%	-4%	-2%	0%	2%	3%	2%	1%	3%
Ohio	-3%	-1%	-4%	-1%	-4%	-2%	-2%	1%	0%	-1%	0%	0%
Oklahoma	-2%	0%	-2%	-3%	-4%	-1%	0%	3%	3%	-2%	1%	3%
Oregon	-6%	-5%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-6%	-2%	0%	2%	-1%	1%	0%
Pennsylvania	-2%	-2%	-2%	-1%	-3%	-3%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%
Rhode Island	-3%	-3%	-4%	-3%	-4%	-4%	-3%	1%	-3%	-1%	1%	2%
South Carolina	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-7%	-3%	-1%	4%	0%	3%	2%	1%
South Dakota	-2%	-1%	-2%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-1%	3%	4%	3%	6%	1%
Tennessee	-4%	-3%	-3%	-3%	-4%	-6%	-2%	1%	1%	1%	2%	0%
Texas	-3%	-2%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-2%	-1%	3%	-3%	3%	3%	3%
Utah	-3%	1%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-3%	-1%	3%	3%	2%	2%	4%
Vermont	-1%	-5%	-3%	-5%	-2%	-8%	-2%	2%	-4%	1%	-2%	2%
Virginia	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-5%	-5%	-2%	1%	-3%	2%	2%	0%
Washington	-6%	-5%	-6%	-4%	-6%	-5%	-2%	1%	1%	-1%	0%	0%
West Virginia	-16%	-2%	-4%	-4%	-6%	-4%	-1%	2%	-2%	2%	3%	-1%
Wisconsin	-3%	-3%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-3%	-3%	1%	0%	-1%	1%	0%
Wyoming	-3%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-3%	2%	1%	4%	0%	3%

Change from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020      Decrease      Increase

Source: WICHE analysis. Note: The unusually high rates of change with Hawai'i 5th and 6th grade enrollments are the result of a smaller cohort of students progressing through the grades, which originated from a change to kindergarten age eligibility beginning with the 2015-16 school year.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> WICHE did not focus on (on-time) graduation rates, since the available information often does not provide graduate counts. For links to available state 'report cards' which often provide graduation rate information, see: Data Quality Campaign, "Show Me the Data 2021," accessed on May 28, 2021, at <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/show-me-the-data-2021/>.

<sup>2</sup> Other research and analysis also found stable 2020 graduation numbers: J. Causey, A. Harnack-Eber, M. Ryu, & D. Shapiro. "A COVID-19 Special Analysis Update for High School Benchmarks," National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, March 2021, accessed on April 14, 2021, at [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_HSBenchmarksCovidReport.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021_HSBenchmarksCovidReport.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> For other analysis about school system total data, typically covering all of kindergarten through grade 12, see for example: Kalyn Belsha, Gabrielle LaMarr LeMee, Larry Fenn, and Annie Ma, "After Enrollment Dips, America's Schools Hope for Fall Rebound," *Chalkbeat*, June 16, 2021, accessed on June 16, 2021, at <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/6/16/22529686/schools-student-enrollment-decline-white-hispanic-fall-2021>. Also, Eesha Pendharkar, "More Than 1 Million Students Didn't Enroll During the Pandemic. Will They Come Back?", *EducationWeek*, June 17, 2021, accessed on June 18, 2021, at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/more-than-1-million-students-didnt-enroll-during-the-pandemic-will-they-come-back/2021/06>.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa Korn, "Hunt Is On for High-School Graduates Who Left the College Path," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2021, accessed on June 24, 2021, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hunt-is-on-for-high-school-graduates-who-left-the-college-path-11624095000>. Kate Taylor and Amelia Nierenberg, "The Dangers of Failing Grades: Districts are trying to figure out what to do with students who fell behind this year," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, accessed on June 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/23/us/failing-grades-covid.html>. Nicole Torpey-Saboe and Melissa Leavitt, "Reconnecting Recent High School Graduates With Their Education Aspirations," Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, June 23, 2021, accessed on June 24, 2021, at <https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-june-23-2021-reconnecting-recent-high-school-graduates-with-their-education-aspirations/>. Sean K. Flanagan, Max Margolius, Molly Pileggi, Liz Glaser, Kri Burkander, Monika Kincheloe, and Justis Freeman, "Where Do We Go Next? Youth Insights on the High School Experience During a Year of Historic Upheaval," America's Promise Alliance, June 23, 2021, accessed on June 24, 2021, at <https://www.americaspromise.org/resource/where-do-we-go-next>. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "COVID-19: Stay Informed with the Latest Enrollment Information," updated April 29, 2021, accessed on June 24, 2021, at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Heather J. Hough, "COVID-19, the Educational Equity Crisis, and the Opportunity Ahead," *Brookings Brown Center Chalkboard*, April 29, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021 at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/04/29/covid-19-the-educational-equity-crisis-and-the-opportunity-ahead/>. Karen D'Souza, John Fensterwald and Daniel J. Willis, "Missing Kindergartners Drive Largest Drop in 20 years in California's K-12 Enrollment," *EdSource*, April 22, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://edsource.org/2021/missing-kindergarteners-drive-largest-drop-in-20-years-in-californias-k-12-enrollment>.

<sup>6</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Spring 2021 Enrollment," accessed on June 7, 2021, at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>. Jessica Howell, Mike Hurwitz, Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, Greg Perfetto, Jeffrey Wyatt, and Linda Young, "College Enrollment and Retention in the Era of Covid," *College Board*, June 2021, accessed on June 9, 2021, at <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/enrollment-retention-covid2020.pdf>. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students," June 9, 2021,

accessed on June 10, 2021, at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> WICHE has indicated that projections have slightly underestimated the number of high school graduates during the past decade due to consistent improvements in the high school graduation rate improvements and offered in the December 2020 report that "continued graduation improvements could yield more graduates than predicted." Additionally, the level of increase above what was projected for most of these states is relatively close to what is historical for these projections, which averages 1.6 percent among these states. For more information about these projections' historical accuracy, see Peace Bransberger, Colleen Falkenstern, and Patrick Lane, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, December 2020, at <https://knocking.wiche.edu/>, specifically the "Technical Appendix" at <https://knocking.wiche.edu/technical-appendix/>.

<sup>8</sup> Students were able to graduate without passing the two key state tests typically needed to earn a diploma: Florida Department of Education, "Florida's High School Cohort 2019-20 Graduation Rate," January 21, 2021, accessed on May 3, 2021, at <https://wwwfldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7584/urllGradRates1920.pdf>. Leslie Postal, "Florida's High School Graduation Rate Hits 90% With Testing Rules Waived in 2020," *Orlando Sentinel*, January 7, 2021, accessed on May 3, 2021, at <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/os-ne-florida-high-school-graduation-rates-20210107-43rlhgh4svblml7cmvj4b7am-story.html>.

<sup>9</sup> The Washington State Board of Education created an emergency credit waiver program last spring, even while the class of 2020 was the first group required to meet a new "graduation pathway" requirement: Jim Allen, "Washington high school seniors set graduation rate records this year," *The Spokesman-Review*, December 21, 2020, accessed on May 6, 2021, at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/dec/21/washington-high-school-seniors-set-graduation-rate/>. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Graduation," accessed on May 6, 2021, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/graduation>. Graduation rate increases were also reported in New Mexico: Rick Nathanson, "NM High School Graduation Rates Increase," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 5, 2021, accessed on May 6, 2021, at <https://www.abqjournal.com/2366449/nm-high-school-graduation-rates-increase.html>. Virginia provided emergency waivers to ensure that students were not held back if unable to take a Standards of Learning test or complete a required course in spring 2020: *CBS19News*, "High School Graduation Rate Increased for Class of 2020," September 30, 2020, accessed on June 9, 2021, at <https://www.cbs19news.com/story/42707166/high-school-graduation-rate-increased-for-class-of-2020>. Note, however, that Washington and New Mexico graduate counts are *estimated* total annual graduates based on adjusted cohort graduation reporting, and WICHE observed some irregularities in producing these estimates.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Chambers, "Even in Pandemic-Altered 2019-20, More Students Graduate from High School," *The Detroit News*, February 26, 2021, accessed on May 6, 2021, at <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2021/02/26/pandemic-altered-2019-2020-more-students-graduate-high-school/6836996002/>. CBS Minnesota, "While Navigating Pandemic's Early Days, Minnesota's Senior Class Of 2020 Set High School Graduation Rate Record," June 10, 2021, accessed on June 29, 2021, at <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2021/06/10/while-navigating-pandemics-early-days-minnesotas-senior-class-of-2020-set-high-school-graduation-record/>. For information about other states, see for example: *Education Week*, "Data: How Is Coronavirus Changing States' Graduation Requirements?," *EdWeek*, April 24, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/data-how-is-coronavirus-changing-states-graduation-requirements>. Howard Fischer, "Arizona High School Seniors Will Get Their Diplomas Despite Coronavirus

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<sup>11</sup> California Department of Education, "California Department of Education Releases 2019-20 High School Graduation and Dropout Rates," December 11, 2020, accessed on May 6, 2021, at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr20/yr20rel101.asp>.

<sup>12</sup> Among these 19 states with data for Class of 2020 graduates, only 6 of them had detail about graduates who were economically disadvantaged; fewer had detail about other circumstances such as English language learners, homeless, etc. Little can be discerned from these graduate count data about these populations.

<sup>13</sup> Hailly T.N. Korman, Bonnie O'Keefe, Matt Repka, "Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis," *Bellwether Education Partners*, October 21, 2020, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor and Nierenberg, ibid. Heather Hollingsworth, "As Graduation Approaches, High Schools Fight to Retain Dropouts," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 11, 2021, accessed on May 12, 2021, at <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2021/0511/As-graduation-approaches-high-schools-fight-to-retain-dropouts>. Catherine Gewertz, "Tens of Thousands of Students May Have to Repeat a Grade. Should They?", *EducationWeek*, May 24, 2021, accessed on May 27, 2021, at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/tens-of-thousands-of-students-may-have-to-repeat-a-grade-should-they/2021/05>.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Rebecca Winthrop, "COVID-19 and School Closures: What Can Countries Learn from Past Emergencies?", *Brookings*, March 31, 2020, accessed on April 12, 2021 from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/covid-19-and-school-closures-what-can-countries-learn-from-past-emergencies/>. C. Kirabo Jackson, Cora Wigger, and Heyu Xiong, "Do School Spending Cuts Matter? Evidence from the Great Recession," National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper 24203, January 2018, accessed on April 14, 2021, at [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w24203/w24203.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w24203/w24203.pdf). Megan Kuhfeld, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu. "Projecting the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Academic Achievement," Annenberg Institute at Brown University EdWorkingPaper: 20-226, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021 at <https://doi.org/10.26300/cdrv-yw05>. Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, Dirk Krueger, Alexander Ludwig, Irina Popova, "The Long-Term Effects of School Closures," Vox/CEPR Policy Portal, November 12, 2020, accessed on March 24, 2021, at <https://voxeu.org/article/long-term-effects-school-closures>. Evie Blad, "Education Department Details New Survey to Explore COVID-19's Effects on Students," *EdWeek*, February 5, 2021, accessed on February 17, 2021, at <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/education-department-details-new-survey-to-explore-covid-19s-effects-on-students>. Ohio Department of Education, "Data Insights: How the Pandemic is Affecting the 2020-2021 School Year," accessed on April 14, 2021, at <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart/Data-Insights-on-the-2020-2021-School-Year>. Isaac Kwakye and Emma Kibort-Crocker, "Facing Learning

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<sup>16</sup> Lauren Camera, "Angry White Parents vs. the Public School System," *US News & World Report*, May 12, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-05-12/angry-white-parents-and-the-new-realities-of-public-school>. See also endnote 20 about the National Center for Education Statistics school survey.

<sup>17</sup> Brady E. Hamilton, Joyce A. Martin, and Michelle J.K. Osterman, "Births: Provisional Data for 2020," *Vital Statistics Rapid Release*, Number 12, Division of Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, May 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr012-508.pdf>. Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, "We Expect 300,000 Fewer Births Than Usual This Year," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2021, accessed on March 4, 2021, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/opinion/coronavirus-baby-bust.html>. Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, "The Coming COVID-10 Baby Bust: Update," December 17, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2020, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/12/17/the-coming-covid-19-baby-bust-update>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, Kearney and Levine, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Heather Hollingsworth and Cedar Attanasio, "Schools Across US Brace for Surge of Kindergartners in Fall", *APNews*, June 13, 2021, accessed on June 16, 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-kindergarten-preschool-surge-enrollment-95d6ce871622f527f16588c68dff3371>.

<sup>20</sup> The Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics began collecting information about instructional mode availability, utilization, and attendance rates for districts with 4th and 8th grade students, in January 2021; see <https://ies.ed.gov/schooldsurvey/>. Also: Juan Perez, Jr. "Biden Hits 100-Day School Reopening Goal, but Reopening Difficulties Persist," *Politico*, May 6, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/06/biden-100-day-school-reopening-485495>. Juan Perez, Jr. and Natasha Korecki, "Kids Are Finally Returning to School. But Most of Them Are White," *Politico*, April 26, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/26/schools-in-person-learning-coronavirus-484542>. Laura Faith Kebede, "Freshman Year, At a Distance: 'It's Like We're Not Even There': A Memphis Student Longs for a Fresh Start," *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, April 16, 2021, accessed on April 19, 2021, at <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2021/4/16/22368217/its-like-were-not-even-there-a-memphis-student-longs-for-a-fresh-start>. Paul N. Thompson, "The Shrinking School Week: Effects of a Four-Day Schedule on Student Achievement," *Education Next*, May 4, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://www.educationnext.org/shrinking-school-week-effects-four-day-schedule-student-achievement/>.

<sup>21</sup> Throughout the year and even recently with the push to re-open, older students were less likely to have in-person options or be attending to some extent in-person: Collin Binkley, "Survey: Even as Schools Reopen, Many Students Learn Remotely," *AP News*, April 7, 2021, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/survey-schools-reopen-many-students-still-learn-remotely-e4d47c469e5bbd96868766771064f620>. Also, Sarah Sparks, "For the First Time in the Pandemic, a Majority of 4th Graders Learn in Person Full Time," *Education Week*, June 10, 2021, accessed on June 6, 2021, at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/for-the-first-time-in-the-pandemic-a-majority-of-4th-graders-learn-in-person-full-time/2021/06>.

<sup>22</sup> WICHE analysis of data from U.S. Department of Education, EDFACTS Data Files: Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/data-files/index.html>. U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data," March 30, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/educational-attainment.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. U.S. Department of Education, "The Nation's Report Card", accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/> and <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/>. Matt Barnum, "A Decade of Stagnation: Little Progress on Closely Watched Federal Test, as Big Disparities Persist," *Chalkbeat*, April 10, 2018, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2018/4/10/21104835/a-decade-of-stagnation-little-progress-on-closely-watched-federal-test-as-big-disparities-persist>. Nick Anderson, "SAT Scores Drop for 2019 Class, but Participation Rises Through Testing in Schools," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2019, accessed on April 14, 2021, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/sat-scores-drop-for-2019-class-but-participation-rises-through-testing-in-schools/2019/09/23/332fc4d0-de11-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/sat-scores-drop-for-2019-class-but-participation-rises-through-testing-in-schools/2019/09/23/332fc4d0-de11-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html). The College Board, "SAT Suite Results: 2020", 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://reports.collegeboard.org/sat-suite-program-results>. U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, "The Condition of Education 2020: Characteristics of Children's Families," May 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cce.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cce.asp). U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (Fall 2017)," accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=898>. Note: Specifically, 50 percent of public school students attended a high-poverty school, where "the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National School Lunch Program provides a proxy measure for the concentration of low-income students within a school."

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help," *McKinsey & Company*, December 8, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>. Ohio Department of Education, 2021, ibid. Kwake and Kibort-Crocker, 2021, ibid. Patrick O'Donnell, "Inequalities Grow Before Our Eyes: Alarming New Data Show Ohio's Black Students Have Lost a Half-Year of Learning, Are Missing More School, During the Pandemic," *The 74*, February 8, 2021, accessed on March 24, 2021, at <https://www.the74million.org/article/inequalities-grow-before-our-eyes-alarming-new-data-show-ohios-black-students-have-lost-a-half-year-of-learning-are-missing-more-school-during-the-pandemic/>. Paloma Esquivel, "In California, a Million English Learners are at Risk of Intractable Education Loss," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2021, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-04/how-covid-distance-learning-hurt-california-english-learners>. Linda Jacobson, "Leaders in California and South Carolina Find Learning Loss – Especially in the Early Grades – But Experts Say Data is Still 'Imperfect,'" *The 74*, February 16, 2021, accessed on March 24, 2021, at <https://www.the74million.org>.

<sup>25</sup> For example: Ohio Department of Education, 2021, ibid. Kwake and Kibort-Crocker, 2021, ibid. Asher Lehrer-Small, "A Glimmer of Hope in Pandemic for Nation's Ailing Catholic Schools, But Long-Term Worries Persist," *The 74*, December 16, 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.the74million.org/article/a-glimmer-of-hope-in-pandemic-for-nations-ailing-catholic-schools-but-long-term-worries-persist>. David Crary, "Catholic Schools in US Hit by Unprecedented Enrollment Drop," *AP News*, February 8, 2021, accessed on May 24, 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/religion-education-united-states-coronavirus-pandemic-627786fc8a69f74bbabbdcc2760da003b>.

<sup>26</sup> Casey Eggleston and Jason Fields, *Homeschooling*, U.S. Census Bureau, March 22, 2021, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>. Michael T. Hartney and Leslie K. Finger, "Politics, Markets, and Pandemics: Public Education's Response to COVID-19," Annenberg Institute at Brown University (EdWorkingPaper: 20-304), October 2020, accessed on April 14, 2021, at <https://doi.org/10.26300/8ff8-3945>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, National Student Clearinghouse, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> This is what could be located online by June 30, 2021. Specific data source details can be found in the [downloadable data](#). Based on WICHE's experience, requests to individual departments of education will be required to obtain the bulk of what is not publicly available online.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Common Core of Data*, as of June 30, 2021, at <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>.

<sup>30</sup> Based on WICHE's collection of high school graduate counts from states for the December 2020 10th edition of *Knocking at the College Door*, graduate counts are less often available online: data about the total annual number of public high school graduates can be found online for 19 states, will require special request to 24 states, and might not be available at all from 9 states. And data about the number of Class of 2021 graduates will likely not be available until fall 2021 at the earliest, and for most states, not until well into 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Data for the 19 states that WICHE obtained public school Class of 2020 graduate counts online from state departments of education, 14 of which included race and ethnicity detail, follow the same definitions as the *Common Core of Data*.

<sup>32</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Universe Survey, at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/pssdata.asp>. Wang, K., Rathbun, A., and Musu, L. (2019). *School Choice in the United States: 2019* (NCES 2019-106). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, accessed on June 10, 2021, at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019106>. In 2021, the U.S. Census Bureau issued state-level rates for the number of households that reported homeschooling in April 2020 and October 2021: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey Phase 1 Week 1 and Phase 2 Week 16, at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>. Jessica Dickler, "During Covid, More Families Switch to Private School from Public Education," *CNBC*, May 10, 2021, accessed on June 11, 2021, at <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/07/during-covid-more-families-switch-to-private-school-from-public-.html>. Juliet Squire, "In Pandemic, Private Schools Face Peril," *Education Next* (20:4), 2020, accessed on June 11, 2021, at <https://www.educationnext.org/pandemic-private-schools-face-peril-policy-choices-may-help-preserve-options/>.

<sup>33</sup> Specifically, the timeframes compared are for fall 2017 ninth graders to fall 2020 12th graders, and the average of two prior school year spans: fall 2016 ninth graders to fall 2019 12th graders and fall 2015 ninth graders to fall 2018 12th graders.